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SUBJECT: Status of Roman Catholic Church Continues to Divide Guatemalan Politics

A sharpening of the ever-present conflict between the Liberal and the Conservative elements among Guatemala's anti-Communists as to the status and role of the Roman Catholic Church in the country has been one of the principal features of the electoral campaign leading up to the October 10 voting and President CASTILLO Armas has increasingly openly sided with the Liberal point of view.

It will be recalled that the Church question began to take a prominent position in Guatemalan politics immediately after the overthrow of the Arbenz regime. At that time, the Archbishop publicly stated that the Church did not wish to become involved in politics and sought only its liberty but he identified himself closely with Castillo's Liberation Movement in the apparent belief that this would advance the position of the Church. Following the Archbishop's lead, the clerical-Conservative group established a program for the "liberty" of the church which, as stated in the clerical newspaper Accion Social Cristiana of July 24th consisted of allowing the church to own its own property; to remove the prohibition against religious societies, priests intervening in politics or labor organizations; and to allow religious instruction in the public schools.

In order to carry out this program, the clerical-Conservatives presented separate "Catholic" tickets for the Constituent Assembly election in various Departments. These tickets were generally drawn up by eliminating persons considered to have anti-Church views from the Frente Anticomunista Nacional tickets and substituting for them persons more acceptable to the clerical party. Although the "Catholic" tickets officially supported President Castillo, they were, in fact, opposed in the elections to the official FAN slates.

As the electoral campaign progressed, President Castillo became more and more bitter at what he considered the opposition to his program coming from "right wing" Conservative elements. He was drawn into taking an increasingly open position against parts of the Church program. On October 9, the day before the elections, he made a statement at his press conference that while be believed the Church should have more liberty than under previous regimes, he

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thought that the Church question should be settled by the Constituent Assembly and he believed that education was the business of the state while religious education was the business of the home and private institutions. On October 11, at a special press conference after the elections, the President was drawn into a stronger statement accusing elements of the "extreme right" of taking advantage of the religious situation to work in alliance against the government with the "extreme left". He added: "I am a Catholic and Guatemala's Catholics must be sure that in me they have their most decided protector, but I believe the Church should not take part in politics."

As the President thus leaned to the traditional Liberal view of clean separation between Church and State, so did his administration. It is said by a prominent Liberal leader that the great majority of the Deputies elected on the "official" ticket for the Constituent Assembly have the Liberal view on the Church question or, at least, are not pro-Church, and this is probably correct. The officer corps of the professional army, which Castillo has been trying to conciliate and to protect from interference by Conservative elements in his entourage, continues to have its traditional Liberal orientation on the Church question. At least half of the Cabinet is said to have Liberal antecedents.

This consolidation of a Liberal viewpoint in the government has stung the Archbishop, Msgr. Mariano ROSSELL Arellano, who on October 10 delivered a sermon in the Cathedral which was little short of open criticism of the government. He said in part:

> "Atheistic Communism now having been defeated, at least officially, the Liberals, the Masons, and the Protestants are already acting to prevent the Catholic Church from recovering its rights and it is truly sad to see how many Catholics--who call themselves such--do not bother themselves for the peace of the Church, notwithstanding that the Liberals once again are putting their sectarianism into practice, counting on the cooperation of the Protestants. The Church must have absolute freedom in order to become the instructor of souls...."

The Church question has also created a cleavage in the Guatemalan press. Clemente MARROQUIN Rojas' La Hora and his former newspaper Impacto have taken a view strongly in favor of the clerical position. Impacto especially has run a series of pro-Church editorials, the latest of which criticized the President for making his statement concerning the extreme right's exploitation of religious feeling. On the other hand, Prensa Libre and El Espectador have backed what they consider to be Castillo's middle-of-the-road position, i.e., to give the Church more freedom but to respect demands to enter into the fields of education and political and labor organizations.

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Division in the anti-Communist ranks on the Church issue thus appears to be growing. The President himself appears willing to give the Church somewhat more latitude than it enjoyed either under the Liberal governments before 1944 or the later leftist governments but he has been veering sharply towards the Liberal view on essentials--that the Church should stay out of education and politics. In the present circumstances, it appears likely that his views will prevail and that the clerical group and Church hierarchy will be less than satisfied on this key aspect of his administration.

For the Ambassador:

John Calvin Hill, Jr.
Second Secretary

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